'Conclusive Evidence' in Hunt Payoff

Washington

The House Judiciary Committee has what its investigators believe is conclusive evidence that a hush money payment of $75,000 to E. Howard Hunt Jr. was initiated on March 21, 1973, a few hours after President Nixon told John W. Dean III that such a payment would "keep the cap on the bottle" of the Watergate scandal.

The evidence, pinpointing the date of the payment to Hunt, a convicted Watergate conspirator, is based on the travel records of Sherman E. Unger, a Cincinnati lawyer and former Nixon administration official.

Informed of the contents of this article, Presidential press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler charged that the information had been "leaked to create a negative inference against the President," who, he said, had never authorized such a payment.

The records rebut a major White House defense of the President — that the date of the payment to Hunt was unclear and that the Senate Watergate Committee initially fixed the date at March 20, one day before Mr. Nixon said he first learned of the hush money payments and the scope of the Watergate coverup attempt.

Unger confirmed, in a telephone interview, that he was the "mystery witness" whose dinner engagement in Washington on March 21 was, unwittingly, the crucial clue to determining the date of the payment to Hunt.

Unger's testimony about the dinner party, along with his travel records substantiating the date of the dinner, were central elements of evidence that led a Federal Grand Jury here to indict seven former associates of the President on March 1 for allegedly obstructing the Watergate investigation.

More important, the travel records — receipts for airline flight from Cincinnati to New York and a New York hotel bill, along with Unger's pocket appointment book — represent the key to a potential article of impeachment charging Mr. Nixon with obstruction of justice.

The records were turned over to the Judiciary Committee last March 25 by the grand jury and were examined at a closed impeachment hearing last week.

Hunt and Frederick C. LaRue, the former Nixon reelection committee official who served as a go-between in the hush money payments, both testified at Senate Watergate hearings that they could not recall the precise date of the March payment.

But LaRue subsequently told a Watergate grand jury that he remembered the payment had been made the same night he had dinner with a personal friend, whom he identified to the grand jury as Unger.

Three members of the Judiciary Committee disclosed separately, and Unger confirmed in the interview, that his travel records proved the dinner — ironically, in LaRue's apartment at the Watergate complex — was on March 21.

"I only had dinner there once that week," Unger said. "My records seem to indicate that it was on the 21st. I won't budge from that. I'm just sorry that I was there."

Unger is not under investigation for his apparently innocent involvement in the March 21 events. But his testimony about them, which he said he gave the grand jury late last year, "Long before March 21 took on any importance to me," could prove to be a critical factor in the outcome of the impeachment proceedings.

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